

NEWS ARTICLE: 03.14.03

MARCH IS READING MONTH

As a state legislator, I am asked from time to time to introduce a Resolution recognizing a specific organization or issue. These designations are to call attention to the good works of groups such as the Red Cross which we honor in March or reflect upon the accomplishments of women as part of Women's History Month.

There are some bizarre designations each month as well, and in March we could celebrate National Noodle Month, Potato Chip Day or Foot Care Month. There's also a National Goof-off Day in March, but lest I give anyone any ideas, I'm not telling the date.

That, of course, is all done in fun, but there are two designations we recognize in March that I feel are not only extremely important, but where I also see a definite connection. March in Michigan is Parenting Awareness Month, and our schools and libraries also celebrate March is Reading Month around the state. Your children may have brought home some extra assignments or fun activities to do with families that revolve around books and reading. This month we have a wonderful opportunity to reflect upon the role of being a parent and interacting with our children, and what better way to do that than share a wonderful heart-warming story together, or better yet, lots of stories.

It's never too early to begin reading to children. My sister-in-law actually read to my nephew before he was born. I believe my great love for books and reading was the result of my grandfather reading to me daily when my father was overseas during World War II. It was a special time my Papa and I spent together that I will always cherish, but it also provided me with a great beginning to be a good reader.

Brain research now shows us that early childhood is a crucial time for brain development. We know the optimal window for vocabulary development occurs during the first 1000 days of a baby's life. Marilyn Jager Adams tells us in "Beginning to Read: Thinking & Learning About Print" that the "ability to read does not emerge spontaneously, but through regular active engagement with print." It was not because of any "super intelligence" gene that I was able to read before I began 1st grade; it was because of the hours and hours my grandfather and I spent together enjoying wonderful childhood stories.

Even if babies don't understand the words, they enjoy being held and read to, no matter what the material. A former colleague of mine in the Senate often spoke about returning home one evening to find her husband reading an engineering text to their infant son; the baby was happy, and her husband was able to study while developing a wonderful bond with his son.

I've read very startling statistics about how few minutes a week, parents actually spend in conversation with their children. Children spend more time in front of televisions and computers and playing video games than engaging in meaningful conversation with their parents. If that trend continues, I fear we might wake up one day and realize that we were actually victims of what we

now consider progress. Would Abraham Lincoln have become our president if he had not spent hours reading and studying by firelight? Many computer programs today are voice activated and don't even require one to read; what impact will this have upon our children in the years ahead.

Do you realize that many children today cannot tell time unless they are using a digital watch or clock? Ever experience a young clerk trying to count change back to you when the electricity was off and the cash register did not do the math for them? Let's not let reading fall victim to a similar fate.

March is a wonderful time to reflect upon both parenting and reading. Please read to a child this month and enrich both of your lives.

By Senator Bev Hammerstrom
17th District